

tion applies – and thus I still don't know why the title was changed.

That's not really a complaint, just a matter of curiosity. I *do* have a few complaints, though: For one, the book is printed on a less expensive paper compared to the 1992 edition, and thus the black & white photos and illustrations don't look as good. And for some reason – and it may apply to my copy only (it was the only one in stock at the British Museum's bookstore when I managed to latch on to it covetously) – numerous photos appearing in the color plates have problems with color balance and saturation. Rano Raraku is an iridescent green, for example, but so are the *moai* (which is especially true of the *moai* at Ahu Nau Nau). Tsk. There *are* some nice aerial shots, including a view of Orongo, another of Papa Vaka, and yet another of Vinapu. One other complaint, and it's really a stylistic one, pertains to a modification of the text wherein the authors discuss the felling of the last tree on the island. In the 1992 edition, the line read, "The person who felled the last tree could see that it was the last tree. But he (or she) still felled it". Great stuff here. However, the line in this 2002 edition reads, "The feller of the last tree on Easter Island *knew* it would lead ultimately to disaster for subsequent generations but went ahead and swung the axe". The "feller" of the last tree? Really! An improvement this is not.

The good news is the index is more extensive, there is a List of Illustrations and a List of Plates, and instead of the woefully inadequate and cumbersome Further Reading section of the 1992 edition (which combined notes and references), there are separate sections devoted to notes and a bibliography. Strangely, the Sources of Illustrations section disappeared since the 1992 edition.

Bock asked in his 1992 review of *Easter Island Earth Island* if another book on Easter Island was needed. He answered affirmatively. And I agree, especially as it applies to this latest manifestation. *The Enigmas of Easter Island* is a meritorious follow-up that belongs on the bookshelf of every Rapanuiphile and indeed anyone with a keen desire to understand this Earth island.

## EASTER ISLAND

Jennifer Vanderbes, 2003

New York: The Dial Press. 308 pp. hardback

ISBN 0-385-33673-X

Review by Scott Nicolay

*EASTER ISLAND* MAY SEEM like an unusually plain and predictable title, given that the island is the primary setting for most of the story, but it in no way reflects a lack of imagination on the part of the author. Instead, Jennifer Vanderbes extracts every nuance of meaning from these two simple words in this, her first novel – a complex and subtle tale of isolation and redemption.

The novel is the story, or stories, of two remarkable women, Elsa Beazley and Greer Farraday, who are separated by more than half a century, but whose lives parallel each other in many ways. Both are brilliant scholars, but both labor in times when a woman's prospects in academia were much more se-

verely circumscribed than they are today (in Elsa's case, almost totally). Their personal lives, inextricably linked to their research (both are married to older men who are also their scholarly mentors) are shattered by deception and betrayal. And of course, both of their lives change forever, though in different ways, on Easter Island. Vanderbes juxtaposes their individual narratives masterfully, and in the end brings them poignantly together, giving the book a structure that is almost musical. Providing an additional counterpoint to the story, though without cluttering it in the least, is the desperate (and doomed) World War I journey of the German fleet under Vice Admiral Graf Von Spee. In the end, this thread also combines with the others in unexpected ways.

RNJ readers will have little difficulty recognizing most of the actual historical events and research that provide the basis for the novel, particularly the Routledge expedition (on which Elsa's adventure is modeled, although loosely) and John Flenley's research on the island's pollen cores (Vanderbes gives Flenley's discoveries over to Greer, although not without acknowledging Flenley at the back of the book, who may be happy he did not have to go through all that Greer does). Those who have read Routledge may also recall the visit of the German fleet in 1914. However, these are merely departure points, and Vanderbes goes far beyond them. In the process, she rearranges historical events to produce a sort of parallel-world version of Easter Island, where the island and its people are the same, but the history of the research conducted there is completely altered, largely to fit the dramatic structure of the novel. Things are familiar up to the visit of the USS *Mohican* (though credited to Cook (sic), with no mention of Paymaster Thomson). From then on, things change: not only is there no Routledge (and Vanderbes tells us early that her version of the British expedition disappeared, thus leaving a tremendous gap in Easter Island scholarship), there is neither Métraux nor Heyerdahl. All this allows Vanderbes to reveal details of the island's prehistory at her own pace, and through her own characters.

All these characters, along with a fairly extensive supporting cast, are portrayed vividly, and Vanderbes fully engrosses the reader in their lives. There is another character whose portrayal is perhaps even more remarkable: Easter Island itself. Vanderbes truly brings the island to life in the pages of her novel, and as those who have been there will know, it is not a place whose qualities are easy to convey to those who have not experienced them. Indeed, on page 30, she writes: "Amazing how little attention people paid to the narrative of the land itself. As though sixty-four square miles of stone were just a stage for late-arriving human actors, whose performance, in geological time, had happened in the blink of an eye." Vanderbes does not neglect this narrative, instead, she weaves it in as an additional thread in her skillfully woven tapestry, and the story of the island, "the perfect microcosm", as Greer envisions it before her arrival, provides not "just a stage" but a vital foundation for the entire novel. Like Elsa, the island's hopes once were dashed by war and catastrophe, but like Greer, it still holds new life in old seeds, and it is her story that brings us into modern times, when regular airline flights have opened a new chapter in the island's history – and its economy, and ended its isolation to a large degree.

Though at least one critic has suggested that the tragic be-

trayal Greer Faraday suffers is somewhat predictable, this is only the setup for her real story. As Greer marches headlong to her inevitable betrayal, she almost resembles one of Robert Stone's Icarus-like doomed protagonists (and indeed Stone is first among the teachers whom Vanderbes thanks at the end of the novel), but it is really her husband, the betrayer who ultimately destroys himself, who would best fit in one of Stone's novels, and this story follows Greer, one American whose life really does have a second act. It is on Easter Island that Greer comes back to life, and into her true self for the first time. This is a property of the island that more than one real life visitor has experienced, and it is this aspect of the island, its most subtle and elusive, that Vanderbes brings across so well.

Vanderbes combines all the threads of her story seamlessly, in such a way that they enhance rather than distract from each other. In another writer's hands, such a complex narrative structure might become pretentious, but Vanderbes simply tells a good story and tells it well. Her prose is as accomplished as her narrative skills, highly refined but at the same time, immensely satisfying.

A particular quality of her prose is her ability to bring her settings to life as vividly as her characters. On almost every page a scene springs vividly to life: a British sitting room, a stretch of dirt road on the island, the stateroom of a warship, an empty concrete science lab. With a few deft flourishes, Vanderbes paints and then animates one vibrant still life after another, as in this example: "Greer sat and pulled out the lunch Mahina had packed--two bananas, a cheese sandwich, and a warm bottle of cola. In the distance, a small jetty stretched into the water, frayed ropes hanging from its rocks. Beneath her, the sea splashed the cliff, and she listened, with surprising contentment, to the rhythm of the waves." *Easter Island* is filled with passages like this, spare, economical, yet fully realized and alive.

One other nice touch is the way Vanderbes handles the science in her novel so poetically. There have always been excellent writers who have been able to do justice to scientific material in various non-fiction genres (Darwin for instance, whose prose Vanderbes showcases so nicely), but it is rare to see someone achieve that feat in a novel or poem. As the lives of her two main characters are so intimately involved in scientific endeavor, the author's ability to convey the vitality of their subject matter allows the reader to identify with them all the more deeply. Especially effective is the way she punctuates Greer's internal monologue with the scientific names of plants, which instead of becoming awkward, adds an additional precision to the portrayal of both setting and character.

*Easter Island* displays a level of craftsmanship not often seen in a first novel. Vanderbes' crystalline prose, the originality of her characters, and her considerable ability as a storyteller are impressive. The few minor criticisms that I might make are purely pedantic: a reference to a clay pot and a salamander found in caves (no ceramics have ever been found on the island in an archaeological context, nor has any zoologist ever listed any amphibians among the island's fauna, living or extinct), an anachronistic reference to Elsa trying to decide if the Rongorongo script is "logographic, syllabic, or alphabetic" (this set of terms did not achieve currency until 1952, when Ignace J. Gelb proposed them in his seminal *A Study of Writing*), the poor quality of the reproduction of a line of Rongorongo script on

page 149 (it's noticeably bitmapped, most likely the publisher's fault), but none of these are points that will concern the general reader. Given the spurious and downright sloppy nature of much that so-called scholars have published about Easter Island, even the staunchest Rapanuiphile can hardly deny Vanderbes a little license, especially when she captures what does matter so well. We need not turn to her for fact, though her novel is certainly well-researched, and other than what she has deliberately altered to create her narrative and the admittedly trivial points above, she provides an excellent introduction to the island for those who have not already been through the standard sources several times over. Those who have will certainly forgive Vanderbes for what she has turned to the service of her craft, given that she uses that craft to present the true spirit of the island, something that has rarely been done so well, if at all.

*Easter Island* is a boon not only to those who know and love Rapa Nui, but to all who enjoy good story telling and fine prose.

## EIF NEWS

### THE PREZ SEZ

SCHOLARSHIP AWARDS for Rapanui students who desire to study at a college or university abroad are provided each year by the EIF, through donations. This year we are pleased to offer two scholarships for Rapanui students: one is the Nicolas Haoa Sr. Memorial Scholarship (US \$2000 for one student for one year) and the other is the Wiegand Foundation award. The Wiegand Foundation award is a scholarship for a Rapanui student of US \$2000 per year for four years. We are extremely happy to announce these awards and we are grateful that we can offer these opportunities to Rapanui students. We sincerely thank our donors and the Wiegand Foundation. We look forward to more great sponsors to step forward and help Rapanui students to toward a brighter future. Our next issue of RNJ will have the winners of these scholarships.

Christopher M. Stevenson

GREETINGS FROM OUR BAYWOOD OFFICE! Aside from our current publications, we have other new items for sale including mousepads showing a *moai* at sunset at Tahai. They are priced at \$10 and make great gifts. We also have EIF t-shirts with a drawing of a *moai* from Rano Raraku. They are available in gray with a burgundy *moai* or sage green with a dark green *moai*. These come in M, L, or XL and sell for \$20. Your purchase helps the EIF raise money for projects benefiting the island and islanders. We also have some interesting used books for sale, donated by members. Contact us at 805-528-8558 (M-F, 9-12 PST), email us at [rapanuibooks@att.net](mailto:rapanuibooks@att.net) or check our web site ([www.islandheritage.org](http://www.islandheritage.org)) for details. We still have EIF mugs with the award-winning logo (designed by Mark Oliver) available, as well as a variety of posters and note cards.

In the woodcarving department, we have 2 *rongorongo* boards available, a *moko* (lizard) and a *paroko* (fish man). We also have a few carvings by Bene Aukara Tuki: a *paoa*, a *rei miro* with chicken heads, and a stunning androgynous figure. These pieces are beautifully carved and come with a booklet about the artist.